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Rains help fill Lake Erie

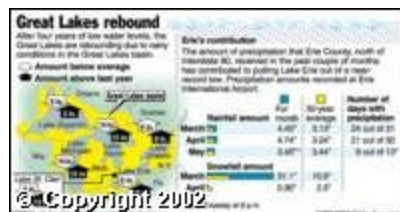
By John Bartlett
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The weather has things looking up for Lake Erie water levels, and even the owner of a boat towing service sees that as good news.

"When the water levels were so low, it probably cost us more in ruined propellers and wear and tear than we made from people in trouble that had to be towed," said Eric Guerrein of Lakeshore Towing Services, 34 State St.

Rainfall so far this year is 7.13 inches above normal, according to the National Weather Service in Cleveland.

That has helped raise Lake Erie to 571.8 feet above sea level, which is 10 inches higher than it was at this time last year and right on the long-term average for this time of year, said Keith Kompoltowicz of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineer's Great Lakes Hydrology Office in Detroit.



Zoom



Eric Guerrein, owner of Lakeshore Towing Services, keeps a watch on Lake Erie water levels. The water depth off his dock is 8 feet, compared to 5 feet in fall 2001. (Erie Times-News photo by Greg Wohlford)

Zoom

"It has been really wet this spring. It has been raining almost every day in all parts of the Great Lakes basin and that has definitely helped the lake levels," Kompoltowicz said. "We now expect the lake to stay about 9 to 10 inches higher than last year right through June, and just a couple of inches below the long-term average at its peak in June."

Low lake levels have plagued boaters and Great Lakes freighters since 1999, and the higher levels now being seen are greatly appreciated by many.

"Anytime you get more water under your hull it's a good thing," Coast Guard Station Erie Commander Chief Petty Officer Kurt Rugenius said.

However, a spokesman for the Cleveland-based Lake Carriers' Association, said the higher lake levels won't be enough to offset the past few years of losses the shipping industry has sustained as vessels had to carry less cargo to avoid running aground.

"Let's face it, it's better news, but it's still not good," said Glen Nekvasil of the



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Lake Carriers' Association.

Often boaters found too little water under their hulls over the past three years, leading to groundings and limited access to many marinas and other locations near Erie, Guerrein said.

Low lake levels proved costly to everyone, and it even impacted local tourism, he said.

"People would sail right by Erie because there was not a good place to go, and a lot of boaters just gave up because some of the launches were unusable," Guerrein said.

His company operates the transient marina at Wolverine Park for the Erie-Western Pennsylvania Port Authority, which is set aside to provide berths for visitors.

Low lake levels meant those berths could not accommodate some visiting boats, he said.

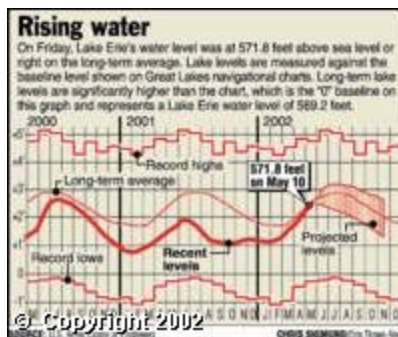
"Right now we have a 78-footer in, and last fall that boat would not have been in here," Guerrein said.

Boaters found the low lake levels of recent years particularly problematic because it was such a change from the near record-high lake levels seen for much of the 1980s and 1990s. Everyone forgot what normal lake levels were like, let alone low lake levels, Guerrein said.



Guerrein measured the water depth near his business Tuesday and found the level 3 feet higher than fall 2001. The higher level allows larger boats, such as this 75-footer, to dock.

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Boaters need to pay particular attention to sandbars and shoals that might have developed this year in waters around Presque Isle, he said.

"With no ice cover to protect the beaches this year there's been a lot of sand shifting around. A lot of shoaling has taken place," Rugenius said.

The higher water levels will mean less beach area and the possibility of more erosion problems, but the levels expected this year are not likely to be a major problem, said Donald Benczkowski, of the state Department of Environmental Protection's Coastal Zone Management Program.

"We are way off from where the water was a few years ago," he said. "Whenever you have a rise in lake levels, there is the possibility for more erosion, but right now I think it would take a pretty good storm for anything significant."



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Great Lakes water levels fluctuate with the seasons, although Lake Erie has far less fluctuation than the upper Great Lakes — Superior, Michigan and Huron. Lake Superior rose 2 inches this year, but it remains 5 inches below its long-term average. Lakes Michigan and Huron are 10 inches above last year's level, but still 14 inches below their long-term average.

Lake Ontario is the only lake in positive territory. It rose 8 inches this year, putting it 5 inches above its long-term average.

Seasonal lows occur over the winter and into early spring before rising. June is generally the high month on Lake Erie, Kompoltowicz.

"They are coming up, and that's good," he said.

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